

NOTES ON MELODRAMA AND THE FAMILY UNDER CAPITALISM¹

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Caught between the longing for love
And the struggle for the legal tender

--Jackson Browne²

First, some statistics. About one-half of the marriages that take place in the large urban areas of the United States this year will end in legal failure--separation, divorce, desertion, etc. This rate is about the same as the state average for California, which is widely taken to be the vanguard state in life-style. Nationally, one-third of all marriages end in divorce.³

A conclusion: the traditional, white, "middle class," two generation nuclear family and marriage, its legal form, no longer function as viable institutions. Today we are at a point in the U.S. where the traditional family and marriage are the exception rather than the norm.

Second, a popular song lyric.

Little One, watcha going to do?
Little One, honey, it's all up to you.
Now your daddy's in the den
Shooting up the evening news
Mamma's with a friend
Lately she's been so confused⁴

Another conclusion: the situation of the family, which has been a core social unit in the bourgeois epoch, is represented in popular culture, from songs like the Rolling Stones' "Mother's Little Helper" to Hollywood's LOOKING FOR MR. GOOD-BAR. But we expect that. This representation appears acutely in the stage and film domestic melodrama during the capitalist era. Of course I will acknowledge that as a general dramatic form melodrama can be found in many periods, as in Euripides' Athenian dramas. Yet the tragedy--or melodrama--of Ancient Greece is clearly of a different order than the situation of Lessing's Miss Sara Sampson, Dumas' Camille, Ibsen's Doll's House, or O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra.

When we look at the emergence of the modern melodrama about 250 years ago (the bourgeois domestic melodrama, to be more precise), today everyone can clearly understand its class nature as drama of and for a specific class, poised against another class: a cultural-ideological weapon in a political and economic struggle that changed history forever. Standard theatre histories and national literary histories acknowledge it. And we can remember that this class interpretation of melodrama emerging as a bourgeois genre was first fully advanced by Lenin's teacher, Plekhanov, and developed with finesse in Arnold Hauser's The Social History of Art.⁵ Yet today it seems much harder for people to see the class nature of melodrama, for what are, I suspect, a few good reasons (such as its

diffusion across class lines by the mass media), and some bad ones (such as a deliberate refusal to acknowledge class politics).

Since bourgeois domestic melodrama emerges with the ascension of capitalism, and since it deals with the family, it makes sense to look at the family under capitalism to better understand melodrama. In his preface to The Origin of the Family, Engels observes that,

According to the materialist conception the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of the immediate essentials of life. This again is of a two fold character. On the one side, the production of the means of existence, articles of food and clothing, dwellings and of the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social organization under which the people of a particular historical epoch and a particular country live is determined by both kinds of production; by the stage of development of labour on the one hand and of the family on the other.⁶

In the bourgeois era, as contrasted with all earlier historical epochs, the family becomes the central area of personal life, a place of respite from productive life, from the alienated labor that most workers must face. This split between productive relations and personal relations, between work and family, between production and reproduction, is unique to capitalist social organization. Whereas in precapitalist social formations laborers (including slaves) operated within a unified life situation while working and not working, under capitalism the proletarian has one life at work and another life at leisure. Meaning and purpose are not in one's work, which consists of alienated labor, but in whatever can be defined outside of work. Given that one's sense of identity and social worth could not be achieved in productive labor under capitalism, the division of social from economic life meant that the family and the area of interpersonal relations took on a huge burden.

In a feudal society the family as a whole was occupied in the area of production, most commonly in agriculture. This pattern persists in the artisan and petty bourgeois family until relatively recently. It is sustained in the U.S. by the long persistence of the family farm and the arrival of immigrants who brought older family patterns--often peasant patterns as in the case of Irish, Polish, southern Italian, and Greek immigrants--into the urban industrial life of American capitalism. But, if the U.S. in some ways has held onto an older pattern of the family for a longer time--especially in nostalgic forms such as we see in the Western, as in SHANE--America has also moved fast and far into the social problems of advanced capitalism.⁷ In twentieth-century America the family completed the transformation from being a productive unit based on private property (the farm, the artisanal tools of production, the small business) to being the center of personal life, the primary institution for the acquisition of personal happiness, love, and fulfillment. From a central place in production under feudalism and early capitalism, women and children were moved to a marginal place as a new division emerges. The home becomes the realm of women and children, and the industrial workplace emerges as the area of proletarian men. Women are responsible for the remaining material production within the home and also for the personal or human values. At the same time, domestic material production has been increasingly socialized (that is, turned over to other institutions of education, health, welfare, etc.) and commodified, as seen on a large scale in the increase in the service sector of the economy and more immediately in the shift to packaged and prepared food. In this context, housework and childcare are divorced from their productive base. Women are assigned domestic tasks that seem increasingly trivial and emotional responsibility for personal problems that have their origin outside

the home. These two aspects of women's lives overlap at the point of consumption. Thus a Pillsbury jingle for prepared dough products claims,

Nothing says you love 'em
Like something from the oven
And Pillsbury says it best.⁸

The more the family loses its possibilities for material production, the more it becomes a prime site of consumption. Mass consumption, the domestic side of imperialist market expansion, contains an ideology of pleasure and self-gratification which is defined largely in individual rather than social terms. With consumption detached from production (the fetishism of commodities Marx describes in the first chapter of Capital), a full life is thwarted. Rather than life, one has a succession of lifestyles.

The family becomes a center of subjectivity, cut off from the world of action and decisions. Home is for passion, suffering, sympathy, sacrifice, self-attainment. Work is for action, doing, for the money which pays for the home. Yet home is also shaped by the ideology of individualism, especially as shaped by the Puritan-Protestant heritage of U.S. life. The family is supposed to achieve the personal fulfillment denied in the workplace for adults and denied in school for children. At home everyone becomes a consumer trying to get a bigger slice of the emotional pie.

From this perspective we can see why so much of the early resurgent women's movement was involved with a critique of the role of the housewife and mother, both by older women rejecting the social mold they were a part of and by younger women rejecting the future that was held out to them. Nor is it mysterious why the emergent feminist movement has often had deep contradictions in defending subjectivity as women's special social quality while also trying to advance the position of women in the male-dominated productive sphere. The personal is political, but that awareness can produce a strategy for change only if we see that capitalism has produced the split between the personal and the productive and that capitalism must be overcome to transcend that dichotomy.

In short, "personal life," the contemporary family, and the special role of women in a social sphere separated from the production sphere can and must be seen as a historically specific form. It is as much a part of the development and transformation of capitalism as Taylorized work and the state operation of education. Under capitalism people's personal needs are restricted to the sphere of the family, of personal life, and yet the family cannot meet the demands of being all that the rest of society is not. This basic contradiction forms the raw material of melodrama.

In this context it is no surprise that melodrama and life coincide. Perhaps more than any other genre, melodrama deals directly with one side of the capitalist dichotomy, with the personal sphere, home, family, and women's problems.⁹ When I visit my parents, my mother and I often sit over coffee while she tells me all the family news, which consists of a series of new changes of personal relations in the clan--deaths, divorces, children rejecting parents and vice versa, people losing jobs and lovers and finding new ones, etc., etc. And my mother often closes the updating of these family stories with the spontaneous observation that they are melodramatic, or "like a soap opera." And they are. In fact, knowing that melodramas are like family situations, we can rather easily find a number of schemes or frameworks with which to analyze both of them, such as the Freudian family romance (which some of the Screen critics have now discovered about 20 years after American critics pointed it out), or R. D. Laing's description of the structure of schizophrenic families, or Eric Berne's transactional analysis, or Gregory Bateson's interactional systems theory.¹⁰ Clearly, they all "work" in the sense of providing a structural framework with which to approach melodrama. For

example, Bateson's double bind fits the situation of Cary (Jane Wyman) in ALL THAT HEAVEN ALLOWS (Sirk, 1955) perfectly.

More directly than other genres, melodrama helps us understand, relate to, or deal with the same kind of situations that we emotionally experience in personal life. I do not want to say it is cathartic and get caught in an Aristotelean framework, but clearly we relate to melodrama largely because it does present situations which are structurally similar to those we emotionally experience in life. It represents to us the contradictions of capitalism as evidenced in the personal sphere.

Melodramatic situations are sometimes directly parallel to the audience's experience. For example, I'm sure some of my readers have direct experience from their own family with the central question in ALL THAT HEAVEN ALLOWS: should a widow remarry, and if so, outside her class and to a younger man? For others the same situation may have an indirect relation to our experience--should a divorced mother remarry, and on what basis with regard to her children's feelings? Or, what are the sexual options of a woman who has reached menopause in our society? Yet others may relate to these portrayed situations only in the more abstract form of seeing a generation conflict which is analogous to the pattern of one's own upbringing.

One of the most persistent structures in bourgeois domestic melodrama is the pattern of a woman sacrificing her own goals--which may be defined as personal achievement, a career, happiness, independence--for the happiness of another person. Without being aware of it when I selected the films, I taught a course in melodrama which showed a series of films all of which have a woman's sacrifice as a major theme: Lois Weber's THE BLOT (1921), Curtiz's MILDRED PIERCE, Cukor's CAMILLE, Arzner's CHRISTOPHER STRONG, Preminger's DAISY KENYON and FALLEN ANGEL, Stahl's BACK STREET, the Stahl and Sirk versions of IMITATION OF LIFE, and Sirk's ALL THAT HEAVEN ALLOWS and WRITTEN ON THE WIND. It is not very difficult to see that the constant reoccurrence of the pattern of a woman's self-sacrifice in melodrama bears some relation to the actual lived emotional experience of women in our culture. As the guardians of the home, as the family member given virtually total responsibility for the emotional life and well-being of the family, women are constantly called upon to sacrifice for the greater good of keeping the man ready for the world of production and raising the children.

Melodramas provide the audience with situations which are analogous to those commonly experienced in family and personal life. Much of melodrama's recurring appeal lies here, in the artistic representation of situations such as a woman's sacrifice that the audience has experienced as well. Understanding melodrama in this way helps explain why "high culture" techniques of analysis and evaluation do not obtain in understanding the genre. For example, plots often unfold with coincidence an essential component of narration. This is easily judged a fault. But if melodrama is appreciated for its situations, rather than for its overall development, then weak transitions are not significant. In other words, the parts may be more important than the whole, and thus the concept and value of organic unity may be irrelevant if applied to a melodrama. Understanding the key role of dramatic situations in melodrama can also help us understand why we so often find totally truncated explanations of character motivation in the genre. In melodrama our interest is not in the gradual exposition and development of a character's personality and decision making, but rather in the direct portrayal of the social psychological situation itself in its artistically disguised, but relatively "raw" form.¹¹

Considering melodrama in this light throws doubt on the assumption that because a melodrama typically demands close identification of audience with narrative that it necessarily follows that the spectators are also passive. It seems possible that the audience is (or could be) actually rather active--selecting, using,



Jane Wyman and Rock Hudson in ALL THAT HEAVEN ALLOWS (1956)

judging what it sees. Clearly, at this point I am offering a speculation, but it is one worth following up with further analysis. Although I am approaching it from a different perspective, my argument here intersects with one made by Laura Mulvey in a paper on *ALL THAT HEAVEN ALLOWS* because we both argue that melodrama gains its strength from evoking contradictions in the sphere of personal life.¹²

Since I've begun to speculate, I will offer four additional hypotheses. First, melodrama depicts the return of the repressed, in the Freudian sense. Sometimes this may be seen directly by showing conversion hysteria symptoms in characters as is rather obvious in *ALL THAT HEAVEN ALLOWS* when Cary is diagnosed for psychosomatic headaches. Or hysteria can erupt in the narrative pattern itself, as Geoffrey Nowell-Smith has recently argued with regard to Minnelli's melodramas.¹³ In addition, and perhaps more importantly, melodrama may act in terms of much deeper psychological structures in an attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable. Specifically, we find the oedipal structure reappearing repeatedly in terms of the home/career division in many melodramas. Some of the strange resonances in *MILDRED PIERCE* can be attributed to the working out of a set of oedipal structures.¹⁴ Similarly, Gretchen Bisplinghoff has suggested that Stahl's *IMITATION OF LIFE* resolves the reproductive/productive, home/career dichotomy by having the white mother take on the father function while the black mother serves as the mother function.¹⁵ Close examination of specific films is needed to confirm, deny, or qualify the function of such oedipal structures.

Second, while it may seem that the great age of film melodrama is over, I think it is not dead but rather going through further changes, and we should not be looking for its current health in *THE OTHER SIDE OF MIDNIGHT* but elsewhere. All three versions of *THE GODFATHER* offer an interesting juxtaposition of the gangster and melodramatic genres with the former genre carrying the realm of production and the latter the realm of personal life. Especially curious: women disappear--the melodrama of interpersonal relations goes on between the men of the family. The result, as John Hess points out, provides an acid critique of the middle class American family.¹⁶ Also we can regard a film such as *LOOKING FOR MR. GOODBAR* as a melodrama dealing with the social-sexual position of young women today. Through a deeply sexist misunderstanding of the objective and subjective situation of women, the film shows not only the split of productive life and personal life in the day and night transformations of Terry, the Diane Keaton character, but also the impossibility of a reconciliation, underlined by an inverted *Liebestod* ending.

Third, I want to add a footnote to one of the best recent articles discussing melodrama, Charles Eckert's analysis of *MARKED WOMAN*.¹⁷ Eckert says that by studying structural oppositions in the film we can see the transformation of class issues into other oppositions: male/female, urban/rural, and so forth. The class nature of the film's central conflict is disguised by these changes. I would add that in domestic melodrama we find the oppositions contained within the family, in the personal sphere, in a way that is at once dense and illusive. Repeatedly we discover very deliberately structured ambiguities in family melodrama. For example, in *ALL THAT HEAVEN ALLOWS* the specific reasons that keep Cary and Ron (Rock Hudson) apart are multiple and vague. Some of it is a difference in class: petty bourgeois property owner and small businessman vs. haut bourgeois widow. Some of it is age (30ish vs. 40ish); some of it is life style. The oppositions can be expressed and interpreted in various ways: within society vs. outside society, small town vs. rural, children vs. no children, sexual fulfillment vs. fear of sexuality, sacrifice vs. happiness, and so forth. But the effect of this multiplicity is not richness and complexity, a presentation of overdetermination, but rather a poverty and ambiguity. The film allows, even encourages, multiple readings. One spectator can interpret the conflict as one of age; another can see class as the central issue, and so forth. No particular reading of the film is correct, except as it is completed by a specific viewer.

Finally, I would point out that melodrama, the genre made earlier by men for

women, is now taken over and changed by women filmmakers. Several experimentalists illustrate the use and reinterpretation of melodrama: Yvonne Rainer (especially *FILM ABOUT A WOMAN WHO...*), Joyce Wieland (*THE FAR SHORE*), Chantal Akerman (*JEANNE DEILMAN*), Laura Mulvey (*RIDDLES OF THE SPHINX*, made with Peter Wollen), and Marguerite Duras.

The flexibility and malleability of melodrama presented here should indicate the importance of studying the genre. Melodrama appeals to the mass audience (and to film critics) because it offers artistic presentations of genuine problems. At the same time bourgeois melodrama locates those problems in the area of the family, precisely where many of the issues raised cannot ever be solved. In this it reproduces capitalist social relations by assuming that the family can and should resolve contradictions arising in productive life. Thus alcoholism can be appropriate subject matter, as in *DAYS OF WINE AND ROSES*. But bourgeois melodrama rather carefully avoids topics that expose the dialectical relation of production and reproduction. The psychological dynamics arising in families and personal relations during periods of lay-offs, unemployment, and underemployment are seldom portrayed.¹⁸ Only when society can reconcile production and reproduction will melodrama be robbed of its animating contradictions. Until that time we can expect the genre to echo the endless transformations of personal life in the capitalist era. In a utopian future, when class history comes to an end, melodrama may well be seen as one of the most poignant expressions of the bourgeois epoch.

Notes

¹I presented an earlier version in a Film Division seminar, Northwestern University, November, 1977. Many participants there influenced my revisions, especially Val Almendarez and William Horrigan who also gave papers and Thomas Elsaesser who lectured at length on film melodrama. These ideas took initial shape through interaction with students in a course I taught at Northwestern, fall, 1977. I want to stress that this essay is tentative in the sense that specific case studies are needed to elaborate and qualify my argument.

²"The Pretender" on his album of the same name (Asylum 7E-1079).

³I have been unable to find the precise documentation of these figures which I read in the summer of 1977 in two sources, one of which I believe was *Time* or *Newsweek*. However I have checked the data for individuals divorced and married in two standard reference works: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the U.S.*, 1976 (97th ed.), (Washington: Dept. of Commerce, 1976), and Department of Health, Education and Welfare, *Vital Statistics of the U.S. 1973*, vol. 3, *Marriage and Divorce* (Washington: HEW, 1977). I am sure the statistics are reliable. Nationally, there are now half as many divorces as marriages each year. The national divorce rate remained about the same from 1920-1960. It increased every year from 1960-1973, doubling in that time. If marriage is no longer a viable social institution, it may be that divorce increasingly is. The growth of related services (special lawyers, counselling and therapy, self-help books, etc.) supports this observation.

⁴Jackson Browne, "Red Neck Friend," on his album *For Everyman* (Asylum SD 5067).

⁵Georgi V. Plekhanov, "French Drama and Painting in the 18th Century," in his *Art and Society and other Papers in Historical Materialism* (NY: Oriole, 1974); n. d.; n. tr. [This edition appears to reprint from a variety of unacknowledged sources: perhaps from *Art and Social Life*, tr. E. Fox and E. Hartley (London, 1953).] Arnold Hauser, "The Origins of Domestic Drama," in his *The Social History of Art*, vol. 3, *Rococo, Classicism, Romanticism*, tr. Hauser and Stanley Godman, (NY: Vintage, n.d.), pp. 84-99.

⁶Fredrich Engels, 1884, quoted in Sheila Rowbotham, Woman's Consciousness, Man's World (Baltimore, Penguin, 1973), p. 47. I am greatly indebted to Rowbotham for my analysis and to Eli Zaretsky, Capitalism, the Family & Personal Life (NY: Harper, 1976). I have also been influenced by the work of and discussions with Serafina Kent Bathrick who is completing a dissertation on women and the family in Hollywood films of the Forties at Wisconsin, Madison.

⁷It's worth pointing out as an aside that most people reading this essay have, or hope to have, a life which combines production and reproduction, economic life and social life. Such unification is the great appeal of being a professional--one's work and life can be one. Yet such unity is achieved for the individual professional and not by the family unit. Increasingly, many professionals--especially those working within state institutions--understand they are not free professionals but rather privileged wage laborers, as is evidenced in the wave of teacher unionization, health sector organizing, etc. An excellent exposition of the proletarianization of traditional white collar work: Harry Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital (NY: Monthly Review, 1976).

⁸From memory. Carol Lopate, "Daytime Television," Radical America 11:1 (Jan.-Feb. 77), 33-51, provides a fine explanation of the relation between the housewife's daily situation and television's soap operas, quiz shows, and commercials.

⁹Conversely, the "male" genres such as the Western and the action film provide a fantasy of power, control, and autonomous activity in the "outside" world of production: precisely where workers do not have power, control, and autonomy.

¹⁰A particularly interesting application of Bateson's work is Chapter 5 of Paul Watzlawick, Janet Helmick Beavin, and Don D. Jackson, Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes (NY: Norton, 1967) which examines the Edward Albee play Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? as a model of confused communication.

¹¹From this point of view, attempts to assign a psychological pathology to characters are misguided. Characters are inconsistent, but not because they are "crazy" (with the obvious exception of when this is explicit in the narrative).

¹²"Douglas Sirk and Melodrama," mimeo, presented at the Society for Education in Film and Television weekend school, March, 1977, in London.

¹³"Minnelli and Melodrama," Screen 18:2 (Summer, 1977), 113-119.

¹⁴More accurately they are electra structures (female rivalry for the same man or thing which is initially linked to one of the women): Mildred vs. Veda for Bert, Mildred vs. Mrs. Beiderhoff for Bert, Mildred vs. Veda for Wally, Mildred vs. Veda for Monte, and Mildred vs. Veda for the business. MILDRED PIERCE provides a good example of my previous point about situation being more important than character consistency. It is virtually impossible to answer the Aristotelean question, "what is Mildred's flaw or mistake?" without obvious reductionism. My understanding of the film is indebted to Joyce Nelson, "MILDRED PIERCE Reconsidered," Film Reader 2 (1977), pp. 65-70.

¹⁵In classroom discussion.

¹⁶"GODFATHER II: A Deal Coppola Couldn't Refuse," JUMP CUT 6-7 (May-July 75), 1, 10-11.

¹⁷Film Quarterly 27:2 (Winter, 73-74), 11-24.

¹⁸Fassbinder's FEAR EATS THE SOUL: ALI, an exception to the rule gains depth by dealing with relations of production and reproduction.